

Abstract

Research Paper: A Gay/Straight Comparison of Gay Voices

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Queer linguistics has often been criticized as a field that has no application and is concerned only with theoretical matters (Motschenbacher, 2010, p. 16). This applies theory to examining the stereotypes that Americans may attribute to homosexual men.

Though it has been shown that there is no such dialect as a gay one, there are features that are stereotypically associated with the speech of gay men. For the purpose of this study, three of those features (the lisp, a raised pitch, and formal [–ɪŋ] endings) were examined in US and Canadian stand-up performances of heterosexual and homosexual Caucasian comedians in order to discover how salient the features might be in the US and Canada. Perception studies have examined these features in the past (Smyth, Jacobs, & Rogers, 2003; Campbell-Kibler, 2007; Van Borsel, et. al., 2009). Though no definitive results were uncovered in these studies, there is some evidence that people attribute these features to assumed gay speakers.

Eight Caucasian US and Canadian comedians' performances of "gay" speech were examined and compared to their natural voices. Four comedians were homosexual, and four were heterosexual. All of the comedians were in their 20s and 30s. Data was collected on the pronunciation of [s] vs. [ʃ], mean frequency or pitch, and occurrences of formal [–ɪŋ] vs. informal [–ɪn] endings.

Formal [-ɪŋ] vs. informal [-ɪn] endings did not show any patterns, but this is likely due to the relatively small number of occurrences. Comedians in the heterosexual group and the homosexual group raised their pitch when performing a gay voice. The heterosexual group, overall, raised their pitch more often than the homosexual group. The lisp was only employed by one homosexual comedian, and it was employed by half of the heterosexual comedians.